



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 7, 2011

U.S. to Iraq: Please Ask Us to Stay

The U.S. is leaning on the government in Baghdad for a new Status of Forces Agreement that will keep American troops in Iraq beyond the end of the year. The current agreement, signed by the U.S. and Iraq in 2008, requires the removal of all U.S. military forces by December 31, 2011. If nothing changes, Americans will adhere to that deadline, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told the New York Times.



“I think our public position, our private position, hasn’t changed, that our plan is to withdraw by the end of the year,” Nuland said. “Were the Iraqi government to come forward and make a request for some continued security assistance, we would be prepared to look at it.”

But it appears the U.S. is asking to be asked, and has been for some time. [Fox News reported](#) Tuesday that the Pentagon recently secured a commitment from the Iraqis to negotiate on the matter and the question is not whether, but how many, American troops remain in Iraq.

“Discussions with the Iraqis on our post-2011 strategic relationship are ongoing, and no decisions on troop levels have been made,” Defense Department spokesman George Little said. “We continue to proceed with troop withdrawals as directed by the president.”

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The predominantly Shiite government in Baghdad, meanwhile, is being pressured internally from opposing factions. Kurds and Sunnis, fearing Shiite dominance and the increasing influence of the Shiite government in Iran, would like some American troops to stay. Massoud Barzoni, head of the three-province Kurdish autonomous region in the North has urged the central Iraqi government to sign an agreement to keep U.S forces and warned sectarian violence will resume if they leave. But followers of the influential anti-U.S. Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr have threatened military resistance if they stay.

At the same time, U.S. officials have been warning Baghdad that unless a request is made soon, it will be difficult to plan for an extended stay. During a [visit to Iraq](#) in July, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta urged Prime Minister Nuri Kamal-al Malaki to name a defense minister and to reach a decision about the future presence of U.S. forces. Panetta voiced his frustration with the pace of decision-making in Baghdad when he spoke to a gathering of American troops.

“Do they want us to stay, don’t they want us to stay? Do they want to get a minister of defense or don’t they want to get a minister of defense?” he said. “Dammit, make a decision.”

Panetta is reported to be pushing for the continued presence of 3,000 to 4,000 U.S. troops to continue the training of Iraqi security forces, while the senior American commander in Iraq, Gen. Lloyd J. Austin



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III, has recommended keeping 14,000 to 18,000 troops there. Quoting unnamed sources, Fox News reported that American military officials fear there will be too few troops left in Iraq to protect Americans there, let alone assist with Iraqi security.

“We can’t secure everybody with only 3,000 on the ground nor can we do what we need to with the Iraqis,” one source said. Another said a very small number of troops will be available for counter-terrorism efforts.

Admiral Mike Mullen (pictured above), chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff has said a new Status of Forces Agreement would have to include [continued legal immunity](#) for American military personnel, a point of contention with Iraqi opponents of the U.S. presence.

“I think the stumbling point of the negotiations is whether to give the American troops immunity from prosecution from the Iraqi law,” Sabah Jawad, director of Iraqi democrats Against Occupation told [Press TV](#). Any extension of American troop presence will be a political liability for the al-Maliki government, Jawad said. “This would be deemed and seen by the people as yet another promise which has been broken.”

It could also be viewed as a broken promise by the U.S. President. When the last of the U.S. combat units left Iraq, President Obama [announced plans](#) for the remaining 50,000 troops. “As agreed to with the Iraqi government, we will maintain a transitional force until we remove all our troops from Iraq by the end of next year,” he said in August 2010.

Both Panetta and White House press secretary Jay Carney said no final decision has yet been made on how many troops, if any, will remain beyond the December 31 deadline. But there will be considerable American presence in Iraq even without an agreement about troop levels. Plans for the expansion of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad call for the presence of thousands of paramilitary security contractors, along with the creation of an Office of Security Cooperation, staffed by civilians and military personnel. “Officials have previously suggested that keeping American soldiers in this office might not require a new security agreement to replace the expiring one since they would be covered by the same protection offered to diplomats, ” the *Times* reported.

Some U.S. military and political leaders have cited the influence of the Shiite regime in Iran as a reason for maintaining a military presence in Iraq. Admiral Mullen has credited U.S. and Iraqi forces with reducing the level of violence in recent weeks by going after Shiite militias. And he accuses Iran of arming the militias and interfering in Iraq’s internal affairs.

“These are hardly the acts of a friend,” Mullen said. “It is clear that Tehran seeks a weak Iraq and an Iraq more dependent upon and more beholden to a Persian worldview.”

According to Fox News, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been the only administration official arguing for a residual force of 10,000 or more. In the U.S. Senate, three long-time supporters of the U.S. mission in Iraq — Republicans John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Independent Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut — issued a joint statement in response to reports of a planned troop presence of as few as 3,000:

This is dramatically lower than what our military leaders have consistently told us over the course of repeated visits to Iraq that they require, and that is needed to support Iraq in safeguarding the hard-won gains that our two nations have achieved at such great cost... In particular, we are very concerned by the prospect that a follow-on force might lack the capabilities and authorities necessary to help Iraqis ensure stability across the disputed territories in northern Iraq, which we



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consider an essential mission.

In a separate statement, Graham said: “Reducing our troop presence down to 3,000 would put at risk all the United States has fought for in Iraq.” The only winner would be Iran, he said. “The ayatollahs would rejoice.”

But the ayatollahs might have started rejoicing when the United States invaded Iraq and carried out “regime change” by toppling the secular government of Saddam Hussein, the long-time enemy of Iran. The U.S. war in Iraq and the rise of a Shiite government in Baghdad have forged a new bond of friendship between the once hostile nations. A [Reuters report](#) in March 2008 showed how warmly and enthusiastically the Iranian head of state was greeted on his visit to Baghdad.

Pomp and ceremony greeted Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his arrival in Iraq on Sunday, the fanfare a stark contrast to the rushed and secretive visits of his bitter rival U.S. President George W. Bush. Ahmadinejad held hands with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani as they walked down a red carpet to the tune of their countries’ national anthems, his visit the first by an Iranian president since the two neighbours fought a ruinous war in the 1980s.

His warm reception, in which he was hugged and kissed by Iraqi officials and presented with flowers by children, was Iraq’s first full state welcome for any leader since the U.S.-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein in 2003.

That is at least one aspect of what has been achieved “at such great cost” by the war that made Iraq safe for Iran.



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